

Interview with Egon Bahr: the Soviet initiative for the creation of a neutral Germany (Metz, 10 June 2006)

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[François Klein] What role did Stalin's note play in the debate in Germany?

[Egon Bahr] A debate that has not ceased to this day, the reason being that it was an offer from Stalin, which I believe he unquestionably made with the ulterior motive of preventing the Federal Republic from joining the Western communities, particularly the defence organisation. It was essentially far too late to make such a bid if it was made with serious intent. But if it was seen as a serious proposal, it should have been sounded out. Adenauer, you see, was accused of not even examining it, but rejecting it even before Britain or the United States could say 'no'. The British, I think, were inclined to sound it out; I cannot recall Paris having adopted any particular position. In any case, once Adenauer had rejected the note, the only possible outcome was rejection. No one realised at all that Stalin had thereby put the GDR on the bargaining table, to all intents and purposes. And in East Berlin under Ulbricht there was a great deal of nervousness at that time, because they were aware, of course, that a united Germany would mean the end of the GDR. And the question of whether Germany, as a whole, could be neutralised in order to economise on German rearmament was, I need hardly say, utterly divorced from reality. We already knew at the time that Austria might perhaps be neutralised, being a small enough country for that, but this great lump of Germany could not be neutralised. If I may leap ahead again to a much later time, I had conversations with Valentin Falin when he was the Soviet Ambassador in Bonn, and with Vladimir Semyonov, who had been the Soviet Ambassador to the GDR back in those days and was head of planning and Deputy Foreign Minister in Moscow, and each of them, quite independently of the other, said that Stalin had been serious about the proposal. He had come to the conclusion, they said, that the consolidation of the Warsaw Pact would have been more stable without the GDR, a state that could not be dissociated from the idea of German unification. But that is all history now.